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The Attack on the Pope: New Link to Bulgarians

By NICHOLAS GAGE

The authorities in Western Europe have information that supports testimony given to them by a Turkish assassin, Mehmet Ali Agca, that when he tried to kill Pope John Paul II on May 13, 1981, he was acting at the behest of Bulgarian intelligence agents.

The evidence, though not conclusive, includes information from a Bulgarian official who defected in France in July 1981.

The official, Jordan Mantarov, 48 years old, told French intelligence agents that the plot to kill the Pope was devised by the K.G.B., the Soviet intelligence agency, and by the Bulgarian secret service, which many Western intelligence specialists consider subservient to Moscow.

The plan was drawn up, Mr. Mantarov said, because the two agencies believed that the Pope was the keystone of a United States effort to subvert the Polish Government and move it away from the Communist bloc.

The Bulgarian Government has called the implication that Bulgarians were involved in the assassination attempt on the Pope entirely without foundation and a fabrication put together by Western intelligence agencies. The Soviet Union has repeatedly denied any role in the attack.

Mr. Mantarov's account, according to French intelligence sources, represents the first report from a Bulgarian defector who was in an official position at the time of the shooting. It was uncovered during a two-month investigation by The New York Times, in seven countries, of the purported assassination plot.

Contacts in Italy

The investigation also found that Sergei I. Antonov, 35, an official of Balkan Airlines whom the Italians are holding on suspicion that he was Mr. Agca's Bulgarian accomplice, repeatedly contradicted information he gave to the Italian authorities about his movements and contacts in Italy.

And it found that Turkish smugglers who Mr. Agca said financed his travels after his escape from prison in Turkey in November 1979 had such close ties with the Bulgarian authorities, including the state security police, that they were provided with documents on some of

contraband goods and escorts for their boats out of Bulgarian waters. This information comes from an associate of Bekir Celenk, a Turkish businessman, who Mr. Agca said offered him \$1.25 million in Sofia in the summer of 1980 to kill the Pope.

Defection Was Kept Quiet

Mr. Mantarov, the Bulgarian who defected in France, was deputy commercial attaché at the Bulgarian Embassy in Paris. His defection has been kept so quiet by the French Internal Counter-espionage Service that the French have only recently told the United States Central Intelligence Agency about it.

According to French intelligence sources, Mr. Mantarov told his debriefers that he was a close friend of a high-ranking official in the counterintelligence division of the Bulgarian state security agency, the "Dzhzhavna Sigurnost." The friend, he said, told him about growing alarm in Communist intelligence agencies that the Pope had been chosen as an instrument to help disrupt his native Poland.

Mr. Mantarov identified the high-ranking Bulgarian official as Dimitar Savov and said he was an official of the agency's counterintelligence division. Independent intelligence sources confirmed the existence of an official of the Bulgarian security agency with the name Dimitar Savov, though they said they could not immediately confirm that he was who Mr. Mantarov said he was.

Mr. Mantarov said Mr. Savov told him that in 1979 the K.G.B. concluded that the election of Karol Wojtyla as Pope the year before was engineered by Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter's national security adviser, who was born in Poland. Mr. Brzezinski's purpose, in this account of the K.G.B. thinking, was to take advantage of growing unrest in Poland and break its ties to Moscow. It is not clear on what basis the K.G.B. might have reached such a belief.

Response to Election of Pope

The response to the election of Pope John Paul II — made by the Soviet authorities and conveyed to the Bulgarians, according to Mr. Mantarov's account — was to "eliminate" the Pope,

and the assignee Bulgarian security had first-hand knowledge of the nation plot, according to Mr. Mantarov's statement to agents.

Although Mr. Mantarov cannot be independently verified, it seems clear that an important official of the security agency for Sverdlov, a former Bulgarian agency who now lives in West Germany, given the name Dimitar Savov, knew of one person

Savov in the security agency in the 1960's was in charge of counterintelligence for Bulgaria's western and southern neighbors — Yugoslavia and Greece.

Later, the former colonel said, Mr. Savov was sent abroad to oversee espionage operations while serving as the commercial attaché in a Bulgarian embassy. He could not remember to what country Mr. Savov was assigned.

Defection in Reims in 1981

A source with contacts in the Bulgarian Embassy in Paris said Mr. Mantarov, who is married and has a daughter, was deputy commercial attaché from 1979 to the summer of 1981, when he defected while visiting Reims.

It is not known whether French intelligence officials have told the Italian authorities about Mr. Mantarov's disclosures, but it appears unlikely, because they are known to be protective of the information they collect. None of the Italian officials interviewed, including the investigating magistrate, Ilario Martella, gave any hint that they knew of the new defector.

According to the French sources, Mr. Mantarov said the K.G.B. became suspicious immediately after the election of Cardinal Wojtyla as Pope in 1978 because it coincided with growing unrest in Poland over corruption and mismanagement in the Polish Government.

The Eastern European intelligence services, especially the K.G.B. and the Bulgarian agency, came to believe that the election of the Pope was engineered by Mr. Brzezinski to inspire the Poles to strike out against the Communist system. Mr. Mantarov told his debriefers. He said that when unrest mounted in Poland and the Pope supported the aspirations of Polish workers to organize into independent unions, Eastern European intelligence agencies became concerned that their fears were correct and the K.G.B. began discussions with the Bulgarian intelligence service on a way to eliminate John Paul II.

Killing of Turkish Editor

Mr. Mantarov quoted Mr. Savov as saying Mr. Agca was chosen as the assassin of the Pope because he was known throughout the world as a rightist after killing a liberal Turkish newspaper editor, Abdi Ipekci, in 1979 and had no links to any Communist country. He was spirited out of a Turkish prison